

Mexico's National Electoral Institute: Lessons from Current Progress, Shortcomings, and Citizen Response

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Abstract

The National Electoral Institute (INE) has been a driving force for democratization in Mexico and a prevalent actor in both federal and regional elections. Previously known as the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) and reformed in 2014, this independent electoral commission has gone beyond ensuring safe elections on ballot day; the INE expanded access to voting, made significant strides for gender equity in government, regulated campaigning, and attempted to ensure fair elections in Mexico. As the INE grows and develops its functions and role in the country, both successes and difficulties have arisen. This systematic literature review employed the academic database, Google Scholar, and other relevant articles to understand the regulatory agency's accomplishments and failures and what both the INE and other electoral commissions can learn from them. Media regulation, working conditions, and regional mismanagement are among some of the topics explored. Public perception of the organization is also examined, investigating the root causes for the trust, or lack thereof, in the INE and what can be done to best legitimize the agency in order to serve its constituents best.

Keywords: INE, elections, Mexico, electoral reform.

Introduction

Since the early 2000s, Mexico has transitioned from a one-party state to an internationally recognized democracy. Many credit the National Electoral Institute (INE), previously known as the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), for this change (Acosta, 2008). The National Electoral Institute's primary function is to aid in "organizing federal elections [and organize], in coordination with the electoral bodies of the federative entities, local elections in the states of the Republic and Mexico City" (Instituto Nacional Electoral, 2021). The entity's roles have expanded in recent years, with significant strides and ongoing challenges. However, it is important to first understand the history that called for such an organization in the first place.

In the twentieth century, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was the sole winner in national elections and had complete control over the nation; the country was a one-party state (Acosta, 2008). Though PRI had a stable government and fair approval, this hold on power was heavily authoritarian. In order to transition to a democratic state, many insisted that other parties must be represented fairly in national elections and have an opportunity to win the presidency.

Some challenges PRI faced certainly helped accelerate this process of change in government toward the end of the century. For example, their poor handling of the 1985 earthquake drew heavy

criticism from many citizens, shedding light on mismanagement of funds, resources, and poor organization (Tavera-Fenollosa, 1998). Just a year before that, when hosting the 1984 Olympics, the PRI had used brute coercion to silence citizens in their protest for better education. Ultimately, the 1994 Zapatista movement in the southern states, which protested indigenous rights and socioeconomic inequalities between the north and south states, was the breaking point for the PRI (Schulz, 2007). This movement brought along fighting, instability, and violence, leaving many to hope for a safer state and a government that brought order, peace, and equality to all citizens.

The people who held office also played a role in decreasing party trust. In 1994, the leading PRI candidate— Luis Donaldo Colosio Murrieta— was assassinated, ultimately replaced by an inexperienced candidate who was not favored by the public. Although the new PRI candidate, Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), won the elections that year, his rule was criticized, and the party lost some of its legitimacy and trust (Rodríguez, 2003). This set the stage for one of the first truly competitive elections in 2000, as the PRI did not comfortably lead in the polls. At this time, the IFE (now INE) was of critical importance in ensuring the outcome would be fair and democratic (Woldenberg, 2001).

In 1990, the IFE was established by a series of constitutional reforms and the Federal Code of Electoral Institutions and Procedures. Political parties, the national government, and even citizens participated in its creation (Instituto Nacional Electoral, 2021). In 1996, several reforms were introduced to this body that detached the entity from the federal government, allowing for greater autonomy and accountability (McNally, 2014). The IFE oversaw the 2000 presidential elections, where, for the first time, a party other than the PRI was victorious. Vicente Fox (2000-2006) from The National Action Party (PAN) took office, symbolizing democratization in Mexico and legitimate elections. Many credit IFE for ensuring fair elections, and the body continued

to participate both locally and federally (Acosta, 2008).

In 2014, the Enrique Peña Nieto administration (2012-2018) instituted reforms to the body again, changing its name to the National Electoral Institute (INE). Among these was greater regional participation of the INE in elections, as some of these were still regarded as heavily corrupt and illegitimate, despite significant advances in national elections (Estévez et al., 2008). Other changes included increased power of the INE to regulate campaign financing and media use, institute gender equity initiatives, and promote greater voter turnout. These changes have expanded the body's functions significantly, which has come with several benefits and drawbacks. This paper seeks to determine what other autonomous election regulatory bodies can learn from INE's current role in the nation and what Mexican citizens think of the INE itself.

Methods

A comprehensive analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data was carried out through a systematic review of literature; this method allowed for the consideration of multiple perspectives and an effective synthesis (Cooper, 2010). The qualitative study follows specific and replicable steps; keywords were used to narrow the search, and all of the documents taken into account were in English or Spanish (the author's native language).

Entering the search terms (such as "IFE" AND "elections," "INE," OR "National Electoral Institute") in the Google Scholar academic database yielded (n = 2034) results, and (n = 96) relevant papers were screened. Various iterations of "INE" such as "Mexican elections body" and "election regulation in Mexico" were included to broaden sensitivity while maintaining specificity. Each of them was evaluated thoroughly on whether they should be included in the final set (relevancy, quality, and credibility were assessed). A PRISMA 2009 checklist was used to guide this process and keep track of source information (Moher et al., 2009). From the papers

screened, (n = 54) papers were excluded due to irrelevance to the review. This included the discussion of IFE policies that are now not enforced and lack relevance to the current INE rules and roles. Others focused on the transition of Mexico to a democracy in 2000, without expanding much on the agency's role after that election. (n = 42) full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. These papers were reviewed and tracked in a spreadsheet. The use of papers in the Spanish language allowed for a more robust set of sources and academic works.

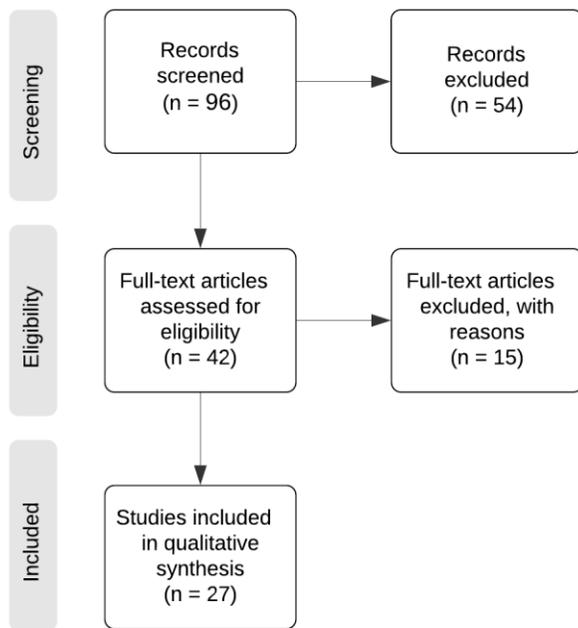


FIGURE 1: Vetting process for systematic literature review

Some news articles about current events relating to the INE's recent decisions were also included in the review, but these were not opinion news sites; rather, these sources merely provided information on actions the body has recently taken and provided statements from relevant parties involved in each situation. These sites were all screened using JBI's critical appraisal tools for legitimacy, credibility, lack of bias, and reliability (Joanna Briggs Institute, 2021). INE's own website was also used as a primary source.

All information sources used were from peer-reviewed journals, works from accredited academic institutions, trusted news sites, and sites from national agencies and trusted organizations; therefore, the data used in this synthesis is reliable and credible.

Areas of Success since 2014

There is no doubt that the National Electoral Institute (INE) was a prominent actor in Mexico's transition to democracy. It has been a trusted body that has allowed the nation to conduct legitimate federal elections that are, for the most part, free and fair (Ruíz, 2014). Apart from this, INE has provided multiple benefits to elections that are worth mentioning and examining.

One of the main changes in the 2014 reform and change from INE to IFE was the wider presence of the regulatory agency in regional elections. Often, these were subject to severe corruption by parties like PRI, who held on to power locally by using methods such as ballot stuffing and paying constituents for party loyalty in local elections (Cruz, 2014). In addition, municipalities and states had their own electoral commissions, which were not as reliable and robust as the IFE. The control of the INE in these elections after 2014 has allowed for more fair elections on the regional scale, one of the primary purposes in the creation of the INE (Torres Rodríguez, 2019).

The electoral institute, however, goes beyond election regulation and anti-corruption efforts. For example, gender quotas have been instituted by INE, setting rules on party candidates with a 50% quota for women candidates in congressional and regional elections. Many have acclaimed this step, seen as a good first step in gender equality in politics (Figueroa, 2017).

The INE has also directed its efforts to promote equal access to voting for all citizens at both the state and national levels. Increasing voter participation and turnout has always been one of their major goals, and they have made significant progress in those efforts (Pedroza,

2015). As a result, Mexico's turnout in both regional and national elections performs above many other nations in Latin America (Sonneland, 2018).

Lastly, the INE has conducted election polls that objectively analyze candidate performance well before the election (Mendoza & Nieto-Barajas, 2016). This ensures that an added level of security as it effectively sets a data trend where discrepancies in the actual election are easily noted. If the results on election night vary with poll results, then recounts and other measures may be instituted, fortifying legitimacy. However, this data is not released to the general public, eliminating transparency and casting doubt on practice; this is one of the many practices the INE conducts that the public criticizes (Nájera, 2015). Below, other challenges the body has recently faced are explored in detail.

Mariana Rodriguez, wife of newly-elected governor Samuel Garcia of Nuevo Leon, for using her social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) to spread the word about her husband's campaign (Expansión Política, 2021). Critics say this action may infringe on the right to freedom of expression and speech, for which the INE has been criticized extensively (González et al., 2021).

One other concern citizens had about the INE is how they hire their workers, who they often call "volunteers." For that same reason, many of their workers are paid less than minimum wage, resulting in heavy criticism from the public (Cantala & Sempere, 2015). The organization's selection process for workers has also been cast into doubt, as there have been reports of ballot stuffing conducted by INE personnel in several regional elections (Cantú, 2019).

The current President, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, has also disapproved of the autonomous body (Oxford Analytica, 2021). He says that they have failed to ensure safe and fair voting practices and are corrupt in nature. In addition, he has criticized the INE's failure to conduct and encourage turnout in the National Popular Poll (which AMLO said would strongly favor him). This has presented a significant challenge to the INE, as their image has been tarnished since Mr. Obrador's comments may influence the president's supporters (Peschard, 2021).

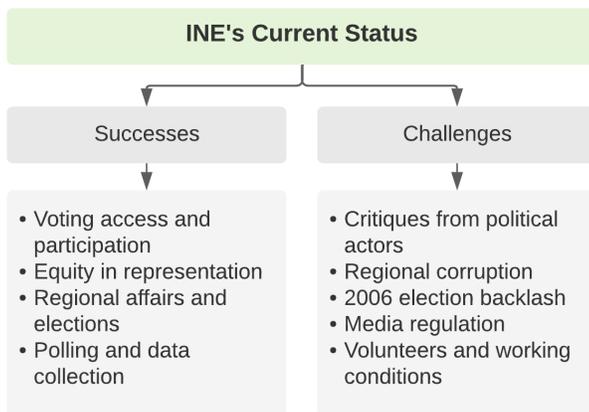


FIGURE 2: Summary of INE's successes and challenges.

Current Obstacles and Criticism

Mexican political parties must follow a myriad of rules for TV appearances and the use of social media in campaigns (Instituto Nacional Electoral, 2021). These stringent rules have put various individuals and parties in trouble, with some arguing that the regulatory agency, although following their protocol, may be acquiring too much control (González et al., 2021). A notable example was intending to punish

Public Perception

Although Mexican citizens have historically trusted the INE due to its role in instituting democracy in the nation, its legitimacy and trustworthiness have fallen in recent years (Pérez-Verduzco, 2020). A 2019 poll conducted by the Mitofsky Association found that trust in the INE fell behind other notable institutions and platforms like the military, the president, and even social media (Consulta Mitofsky, 2019). Many credit some of the aforementioned shortcomings and general distrust in Mexican public and governmental institutions. It is important to

mention that trust in elections themselves has not fallen as quickly, making it clear that other factors within INE itself play a role in public perception (Gómez, 2011).

One of the most influential events in the deterioration of the INE's public trust was the 2006 presidential election (Jackson, 2014). This was a significant challenge for the regulatory body as the results were heavily disputed and challenged. One of the candidates, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (now president, 2018-2024), called for a recount and blamed the IFE (now INE) for failing to ensure a fair and democratic process. According to general consensus, the IFE had been unable to safeguard a legitimate election (Ortega & Somuano, 2014). The 2006 election continues to impact the entity's legitimacy to this date, as questions about its true autonomy and effectiveness still linger on the public's mind, leaving a salty taste of what was a poorly organized process and questionable outcome (Jackson, 2014).

Conclusion and Discussion

The INE has undoubtedly had a significant impact on Mexico, leading the way for democratization and legitimate elections in the country. However, this institution has expanded beyond the role of making elections safer and fairer at voting day; it has taken significant steps to venture out into other areas of public service and political action (McNally, 2014). Voting rights, access, and equity continue to be an ongoing point of focus for the INE as they expand their reach geographically and virtually (with social media). However, the lack of trust in the organization has hindered some of this progress, as citizens do not see this body as truly independent and reliable (Valverde, 2019). The INE must work to ensure that regional elections are entirely rightful since perpetual scandals in these elections delegitimize the organization.

The INE must also publicly address the 2006 election and ensure voters that the same mistakes and mismanagement will not occur again. Working together with the legislative

branch to propose measures like partnerships with regional agencies and initiatives like the implementation of more modern voting machines could aim in this effort, showing the public that guidelines would prevent further attempts (mostly regionally) to commit fraud. Releasing their poll data before elections is also essential in establishing trust in the body, ensuring complete transparency throughout the voting process.

It is without a doubt that INE has also taken other roles that have made progress beyond election day. For example, women's quotas for nomination have proven to be an effective method of gender equality in the Mexican political process (Figueroa, 2017). Other nations like Argentina and Chile have instituted similar programs that have been beneficial at increasing representation, showing the widespread success of such actions (Gray, 2003). The INE ought to continue to focus on expanding its role with initiatives like this, basing them on the needs of citizens. The use of polls and existing national data could be helpful in determining what these priorities are for the Mexican public.

One of the limitations of this paper is that the data relating to the body is fairly recent and limited, making it difficult to thoroughly analyze the successes and failures of the newly-instituted body in complete certainty. However, situations relating to the IFE that still apply to the new organization serve to fill those knowledge gaps. Additionally, this paper primarily focused on the organization's efforts pertaining to traditional voting; although the topics of gender equity and media were touched upon, they could be explored in much further detail as they have been central in Mexico's political and social identity and continue to offer important pieces of information and for analysis.

Therefore, further research could expand on some of the various avenues the INE has taken in recent years, particularly gender equity in the electoral process. Furthermore, investigating the effectiveness of quotas not only in women's representation but also in the policy that is passed as a result of a more diverse body is of critical

importance to understanding the extent to which the INE has played in this front. Lastly, more public opinion polls regarding the reasons for discontent with the organization must be conducted to better understand the reasons for falling confidence in the INE; this way, the organization can implement appropriate changes to legitimize itself further and be able to effectively regulate elections with complete trust from the public.

In hindsight, the INE must ensure that it functions in complete service to the public and democracy; they must be able to safely regulate voting at both the national and regional level and regain trust from the public to continue to function in a manner that made them the leading force to democratization in twenty-first-century Mexico.

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